

Tilburg University

NEEO and Economists Online

Geleijnse, J.P.J.; Williams, P.J.

Published in:
SCONUL Focus

Publication date:
2007

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Geleijnse, J. P. J., & Williams, P. J. (2007). NEEO and Economists Online. *SCONUL Focus*, (42), 33-35.

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NEEO and Economists Online



Hans Geleijnse
Librarian
Tilburg University
Tel: +31 13 466 2121
Email: Hans.Geleijnse@uvt.nl



Peter Williams
Subject Librarian for Economics and Political Sciences
University College London
Tel: 020 7679 3078
Email: p.j.williams@ucl.ac.uk

On 3–4 September 2007, a meeting was held in Tilburg in the Netherlands to launch a new EU-funded project called Network of European Economists Online (NEEO). At the event were representatives from the libraries of the London School of Economics (LSE), Oxford University, University College London (UCL) and Warwick University, along with information specialists from institutions in Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Spain.

NEEO's aim is to bring together Europe's top economics research and make it available through a new multilingual portal called Economists Online. Economics information is currently scattered in a number of places – in the hard drives of individuals, on economists' home pages, in journal aggregators and so on – and the portal will bring this diverse research output together in one place.

The project will be coordinated by Tilburg University and will run for thirty months, until 1 March 2010. By that time, Economists Online will have become one of the biggest information services available to economics researchers. Its key features will include:

- access to 50,000 bibliographic references, at least a third of which will be full-text journal articles, working papers, book chapters, conference proceedings and primary datasets

- a showcase of 500 leading European economists, including comprehensive publications lists
- access to further worldwide content of relevance to the economist
- multilingual searching in English, French, German and Spanish
- extensive intellectual property rights (IPR) advice and documentation for authors and librarians.

The model for Economists Online is a simple but powerful one. All the universities involved in the project have an institutional repository (IR) – that is, a digital archive of academic work produced by members of the university. Economists will be encouraged to deposit copies of their publications and datasets in their local IR and Economists Online will then pick up (or 'harvest') these publications, making them cross-searchable and accessible from a central access point.

SIXTEEN UNIVERSITIES FROM EIGHT COUNTRIES

The following are the participating universities:

Charles University in Prague (CERGE)
Erasmus University Rotterdam
German National Library of Economics / Kiel
Institute for the World Economy
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
London School of Economics and Political Science
Maastricht University
Sciences Po
Tilburg University
Universidad Carlos III de Madrid
Université Libre de Bruxelles
Université Paris Dauphine
Université Toulouse 1 Sciences Sociales
University College Dublin
University College London
University of Oxford
University of Warwick.

NEREUS

The ideas behind Economists Online grew out of the Nereus Consortium, a group of European economics libraries that has met regularly since 2003 and is led by Jean Sykes, the director of library and information services at the London School of Economics. Nereus was responsible for developing an early pilot version of the portal in 2005, which featured a limited number of economists from six universities. Lessons learned from the pilot made it clear that extra resources would be needed for its further development and a more

ambitious plan was put together which formed the basis of the successful bid to the EU earlier this year.

Economists Online is funded by the European Commission's Information, Society and Media Directorate-General. Its 'eContentplus' programme aims to 'make digital content in Europe more accessible, usable and exploitable' and the bid therefore sought to address these concerns, describing how the project will bring together information that is currently dispersed and will enhance multilingual access to research. The project's budget is €1,976,208, of which 50% will be funded by the EU with the other half found by the project partners.

TIMETABLE

Economists Online is being run according to current project management methodology, with a project leader, a project management board and regular meetings to monitor progress and discuss issues. Activities are divided into eight sub-sets or 'work packages', each reflecting a specific aspect of the project. These are:

- 1 Project management
- 2 User requirements
- 3 Content – traditional publications
- 4 Content – datasets
- 5 Interoperability infrastructure and gateway
- 6 Multilingual issues
- 7 Awareness and dissemination
- 8 Assessment and evaluation.

Each work package has set targets ('deliverables' and 'milestones') that must be achieved within a given timeframe. In addition to the technical work on the gateway, key early events include:

November 2007: launch of the project website
December 2007: online questionnaire designed to identify user requirements
February 2008: completion of IPR documentation, in four languages.

The basic Economists Online portal will go live in August 2008, initially displaying the content of six partners. Over the following months records from the remaining institutions will be added, as well as further worldwide content.

CHALLENGES (1): GETTING ACADEMIC STAFF ON BOARD

One of the biggest challenges facing the libraries involved will be convincing economists to

regularly deposit work in their local repository. Although the benefits of IRs (such as increased visibility) seem clear to librarians, they are not always apparent to academics and the case has to be made. Publicity material has been developed to assist this process and each library will be undertaking an intensive programme of advocacy that will include both presentations and one-to-one meetings. It is hoped that a positive side-effect of these efforts (and of the project as a whole) will be the development of stronger library-department links.

In addition to being told about the advantages of contributing to Economists Online, economists need to be reassured about the amount of their time their participation will involve and how it will fit into their workflows. Evidence also shows that there remains confusion about copyright issues and authors may be unwilling to risk antagonising their publishers. It is not widely known by the academic community, for example, that the majority of publishers do allow authors to deposit copies of their work in an IR. A crucial early strand of the project is therefore to develop IPR advisory material in the form of a 'toolkit' that will address these concerns. The toolkit, which will draw upon copyright expertise in the partner institutions, will be made available through the project website and will offer advice and reassurance to researchers on a range of IPR issues.

A related challenge will be that of creating a service that is attractive to economists as a research tool. Another important part of the project will be its user surveys, which will include questions about economists' research habits and preferences. Their answers will help determine the precise development and design of Economists Online during the thirty-month period. This will better guarantee that the service will meet the current needs of the economics publisher and the reader. The project also has a scientific advisory board made up of well-known economists from the institutions involved, and their input will also be important in determining the design of the service.

CHALLENGES (2): WORKING TOGETHER

A second big challenge will be that of actually making a project with sixteen partners from eight countries run effectively. Some major European projects have failed in the past because of a lack of cooperation and mutual understanding, and good, open communications between partners will be essential if Economists Online is to become a success.

The fact that the participants already know each other through Nereus is therefore extremely helpful. Consortium meetings have always included information specialists as well as senior managers and the relationships forged at these events (and by working together on initiatives such as the Economists Online pilot) will contribute to the smooth running of the project.

ECONOMISTS ONLINE AND OPEN ACCESS

Economists Online has been influenced strongly by the open access movement and current ideas about improving scholarly communications. The aim is to improve the accessibility and visibility of research information, including as much full text as possible. Where open access cannot yet be achieved, bibliographic records will provide links to source of the full text. The work of the project will undoubtedly be of relevance to anyone with an interest in this area and, if it is successful, Economists Online could serve as a template for similar initiatives in other subject disciplines.

CONCLUSION

Economists Online is an ambitious project which will intrigue librarians in the social sciences. Its collaborative nature will make it pertinent to others involved in joint initiatives and its progress will certainly be of importance to anyone who is concerned with the issues surrounding institutional repositories. Above all, since the aim of Economists Online is to organise information and make it more accessible, its subject-oriented model is potentially of interest to all information professionals.

Further information: www.neresu4economics.info/neco